

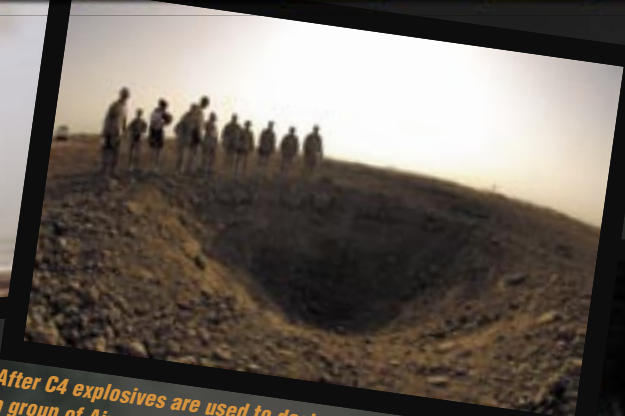
Senior Airman Mike Credidio uses a thermal imaging sensor to spot potential Improvised Explosive Devices before team members move forward to conduct a more extensive search on foot.

# DEFUSING THE ENEMY

by Tech. Sgt. Jason Tudor  
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



After C4 explosives are used to destroy ordnance, (left) a group of Airmen from Sather Air Base, Iraq, (middle) view the blast site.



Senior Airman Mike Credidio (below) holds a Russian Sabot kinetic energy weapon found during a search of a field suspected of serving as a launch site.



## TEAM DISARMS IEDs ONE AT A TIME

**T**he thumbtacks number in the hundreds. Blue. Yellow. Red. Green. White. They cover a large white map of Baghdad's southwest side like some creation Picasso might have made on a child's Lite-Brite toy.

Red tacks are the favorite for dirty, worn thumbs that must press them into the map. Each time a member of the Air Force explosive ordnance disposal team at Sather Air Base, Baghdad, Iraq, pushes one in, it means they destroyed another Improvised Explosive Device that could have potentially killed someone.

The yellow (unexploded ordnance), white (weapon caches) and blue tacks — representing an EOD response where nothing was found — are just as important. A red tack with a black top means something's already exploded.

Using a variety of high-tech equipment, special clothing and training, the 12 members of the EOD team have dealt with 62 IEDs and 1,685 UXOs in just 90 days. They've destroyed almost 54,000 small arms and a van packed with about 700 pounds of explosives.

Given the danger of their mission, Tech. Sgt. Michael Lenfesty said there's no place he'd rather be working.

"This is the culmination of all of our training in our EOD career," said the EOD craftsman.

The work is "feast or famine," he said. Some days there are no calls. On others there may be eight or nine.

"We're not typical emergency responders, but we do respond to certain emergencies," the sergeant added.

The team's area of response includes the Baghdad International Airport complex plus a chunk of land outside the wire that amounts to an area about twice the size of Washington, D.C. They are among few Airmen at Sather who go outside the base perimeter. Within minutes of receiving a call, the EOD team suits up with 45 pounds of extra

gear and roll out in their armored vehicles. They may respond to a simple call like picking up an unexploded rocket or may spend more than four hours disarming a roadside IED. All the while, looking for additional hidden explosives set to specifically kill EOD responders.

Inside the wire and the 447th Air Expeditionary Group, people like Senior Airman Nicole Gonzalez are EOD's eyes and ears. Airman Gonzalez is part of the 447th Air Expeditionary Group readiness team, who teaches others how to spot UXOs.

Her team frequently uses all-terrain vehicles to conduct searches throughout the base. She's been close — too close — to the action three times so far, she said.

"We were pouring cement for a tent and all of a sudden, a UXO rolled out. We thought it was a rock. Then, we went, 'Whoa!' and realized it wasn't a rock," she said. "We cleared the area and called EOD. They made it safe,

but it was a live one."

Explosive ordnance disposal practitioners know their work isn't an exact science. Even their technical orders shout, "good luck!"

One order reads: "There is no 'safe' procedure for rendering safe and disposal, merely a procedure which is considered least dangerous."

Another more tongue-in-cheek phrase says that: "EOD is a science of vague assumptions based on debatable data taken from inconclusive experiments with instruments of problematic accuracy by persons of questionable mentality."

While ambiguity appears to abound, all the EOD troops agree they're happy to be doing their work in the "real world." Senior Airman Mike Credidio, who's been disarming explosives for a year and a half, said the hands-on work is amazing.

"It's a rush. It's always a rush. We actually get to do our job here," he said. The job changes every day, so "the en-

emy is constantly changing how they set up IEDs for us and we keep changing with them, and beating them every time."

Almost gone are the days where a human has to walk up to an explosive to render it useless. Now, technicians use a herd of robots. The larger robots are actually used to view and disarm a bomb, using metal claws, shotguns and other means.

EOD has turned toys into tools. Radio-controlled off-road vehicles formerly raced as hobbies have turned into couriers. The senior airman said the "Bomb Bots" carry tools or other items to the larger robots during an incident.

At the end of each day, colored thumbtacks will continue to be pressed into the map. However, Sergeant Lenfesty said, the goal is to ensure, regardless of what color is added, everyone involved is safe.

"When we pull up to a roadside bomb, past a convoy of troops that's three miles long, take care of the threat and make sure those people are safe, that's what matters," he said. 🐦

